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Case Study: Galina Rymbu, “Moia vagina,” June 2020

On 27 June 2020, the prominent feminist poet Galina Rymbu published the poem «Моя вагина» (“My Vagina”) on her Facebook feed. «Моя вагина» is a solidarity poem, written in support of artist and LGBTQ activist Iuliia Tsvetkova, who is facing a charge of distributing pornography for her abstract paintings of vaginas in a group on the social media platform VKontakte. Rymbu’s poem created huge resonance: it was shared, translated and republished on various platforms on the web and in print, examined by researchers, and debated as both a work of literature and a political statement. The present article charts the story of this remarkable poem, from its origins to its formal properties, its place within contemporary feminist poetry and its close links to feminist activism, and the reactions it has triggered. It also analyses the follow-up poem Rymbu wrote in reply to her detractors, «Великая русская литература» (“Great Russian Literature”), with a focus on Rymbu’s ingenious play on personal pronouns. Finally, it will briefly look at the role of social media for the literary process in Russia, specifically the field of poetry.

Keywords: Galina Rymbu, feminist poetry, Russia, social media

On 27 June 2020, the prominent feminist poet Galina Rymbu – already discussed in the present volume by Stephanie Sandler and Dmitriï Kuz’min – published a poem called «Моя вагина» (“My Vagina”) on her Facebook feed.¹ Rymbu’s original post was shared over 200 times from Facebook alone and triggered a huge debate, some of it acrimonious. Poets felt prompted to write poems

¹ See Rymbu (2020a).

in response and/or support,² several feminist platforms abroad translated the poem, a public art project photoshopped it onto residential buildings,³ and several cultural institutions in Russia released statements in defence of Rymbu.⁴ Perhaps it is a coincidence, but a few days later the Russian platform *Takiedela*, which focuses on social issues rather than art, published a special section on feminist poetry in which the heated debate around «Моя вагина» (“My Vagina”) assumed a prominent position.⁵ Evidently, the word ‘vagina’ is still incendiary, and a vagina as the protagonist of a poem is anathema to many.⁶ In February 2021 – over half a year after the poem became a literary sensation – Facebook removed Rymbu’s original post, far too late to stop the proliferation of the text. However, as one commenter noted, the post had attracted so many comments that it had acquired sociological value; and these comments are now lost.⁷

«Моя вагина» (“My Vagina”) is itself a solidarity poem, written in the first person, in support of artist and LGBTQ activist Iuliia Tsvetkova. Tsvetkova is facing a charge of producing and distributing pornography on the internet⁸ for her abstract paintings of vaginas, which appeared in a VKontakte group called «Монологи вагины» (“The Vagina Monologues”)⁹ – probably in homage to Eve Ensler’s eponymous, now world-famous play on female experience (premiered in 1996) – as well as for a body positivity campaign under the title «Женщины – не куклы» (“Women are not Dolls”) that featured schematic drawings of naked women’s bodies.¹⁰ Various artists and organisations have been producing material in solidarity since Tsvetkova was first charged in December 2019.¹¹ On 27 June 2020, a concerted support campaign called “Media Strike” began, which included

² On Facebook: for example, Irina Kotova, «Я – устала» (Kotova 2020). Alla Gorbunova’s «Стихотворение, которое я бы написала о своем члене, если бы была мужчиной», mentioned in various literary digests (see Oborin 2020b), has since been removed. Nadia Delaland wrote a stylized ode to the vagina, «О, да Вагине», on the page of the Moscow Women’s Museum (Delaland n.d.). Further reactions – by Lida Iusupova, Ekaterina Simonova and Mariia Vilkoviskova – are cited on the page of the *Poëziia feminizma project* under the rubric «Битва за вагину».

³ As done by the *Yes Women Group* (see Links – [1] and [2]).

⁴ Pioner Bookstore, Moscow: see Links – [3]; Novoe Literaturnoe Obozrenie, the prestigious publisher: see Links – [4]; Andrei Voznesenskii Center: see Links – [5].

⁵ See Bobylëva (n.d.).

⁶ As noted, drily, by Lev Oborin (2020a).

⁷ For Rymbu’s own commentary see Rymbu (2021).

⁸ Paragraph “b”, Part 3 of Article 242 of the Criminal Code of the Russian Federation, punishable by up to six years of prison.

⁹ See Links – [6].

¹⁰ See Links – [7].

¹¹ See, for example, an art exhibition in Moscow back in December (Links – [8]). The various support campaigns are documented on a dedicated website (Links – [9]).

a female-body-themed photo exhibition by the wonderzine art project¹² and the poetry reading marathon for which Rymbu wrote her poem, curated by the Voznesenskii Center in Moscow.¹³ Running to over nine hours, this marathon is an astonishing feat in itself and evidence of the resonance of feminist themes in the contemporary Russian poetry scene. In its statement of support, the Pioneer Bookstore claims that «Первым мостиком между активизмом и современной поэзией в этой истории стало [...] ее же стихотворение [Галины Рымбу] „Моя Вагина“.»¹⁴ (“The first bridge between activism and contemporary poetry is [Galina Rymbu’s] poem ‘My Vagina.’”) This is not quite correct – indeed, the link between feminist activism and poetry is well established in Russia today.

Rymbu is one of the figureheads of a literary current that is rapidly gaining prominence, and «Моя вагина» was born within a context that the author herself has shaped and by which she has been nourished. The poets at the forefront of *fem-poëziia* form an effective if ultimately small network, the members of which promote one another. Many of them espouse a clear political position.¹⁵ The fusion of (literary) aesthetics with a political agenda is a deliberate strategy here and one of the objectives of the foundation, in 2017, of the feminist platform *F-Pis'mo*, which is part of the cultural website *syg.ma*.¹⁶ Three of the best-known representatives, all around 30 years old at the time of writing – Galina Rymbu, Oksana Vasiakina and Dar'ia Serenko – studied together at the Literary Institute in Moscow. Several prominent poets are also prolific literary critics and/or curators of literary platforms, and change roles seamlessly: Rymbu co-founded *F-Pismo*, which she edits alongside Elena Kostyleva, Lolita Agamalova, Stanislava Mogilëva and Ekaterina Zakharkiv, while Anna Golubkova is one of the moderators of the platform *Artikuliatsiia*. Vasiakina and Serenko also curate art and media projects.¹⁷

¹² See Links – [10].

¹³ For the recording of the marathon see Links – [11].

¹⁴ See Links – [3].

¹⁵ A few examples: Kostyleva used to be a member of the infamous art collective *Voïna*, which organized high-profile stunts in the 2000s. In her interview for the project for *Poëtika feminizma* Lida Iusupova states: «Российский патриархат – огромная проблема современной российской фемпоэзии. Феминистская поэзия – это поэзия борьбы с патриархатом, поэтому у нее не может быть большей проблемы, чем патриархат.» (“The Russian patriarchy is an enormous problem for contemporary Russian feminist poetry. Feminist poetry is the poetry of struggle against the patriarchy, which is why it cannot have a greater problem than the patriarchy.”) (Iusupova n.d.). Dar'ia Serenko talks eloquently about art and feminist activism (Serenko 2017).

¹⁶ This concept, including its theoretical foundation, is discussed by Henrieke Stahl (2015: 442-445). Rymbu details her considerations in Rymbu (2020c).

¹⁷ Vasiakina tirelessly promotes feminist literature and poetry. Her contribution on *Wonderzine's* virtual bookshelf lists only books by women authors, and she makes a point of naming Lida Iusupova – in her late fifties and, in style and subject matter, clearly a role model for

Fempeziia as a literary current has been catalyzed by the various literary projects of veteran publisher and curator Dmitrii Kuz'min: his journal *Vozdukh*, in particular, has published Vasiakina (No 4, 2014), Rymbu (multiple times, featured author in No 1, 2016), Serenko (No 4, 2014), and Lida Iusupova (multiple times, featured author in No 4, 2014). ARGO RISK, the publishing house he heads, has published collections by Vasiakina, Rymbu, Iusupova and Serenko; Elena Kostyleva was published for the very first time in his journal *Vavilon* in 2001.¹⁸ In 2020/2021, *Fempeziia* arrived in English with three seminal publications: Iusupova's "The Scar we Know" (Preface: Oksana Vasiakina), Rymbu's "Life in Space," and the much-debated anthology "F-Letter: New Russian Feminist Poetry,"¹⁹ which has the potential to become the definitive reference collection for both English-and Russian-speaking readers owing to the fact that it is bilingual. "F-Letter," named after the *F-Pis'mo* platform, features twelve poets and many of the best-known 'activist' poems, such as Egana Dzhabbarova's «ямы сестры хачатурян» ("we are all the khachaturian sisters"),²⁰ Kostyleva's poem about the torture of homosexuals in Chechnya and Vasiakina's «Эти люди не знали моего отца» ("These people didn't know my father"), which acknowledges the formative significance of Lida Iusupova's 2016 poetry collection "Dead Dad" for the aesthetic of contemporary feminist poetry. Iusupova and Rymbu, whose seminal poems «Минутки» ("One Minute") and «Моя вагина» bookend the collection, are the only poets in the anthology represented by two poems each. Rymbu acted as a co-editor for the anthology – a testimony to her growing reputation and influence as a curator as well as a writer.

Now, in 2021, these feminist poets are able to reach a considerable audience through their various projects. One indicator of their success is the week-long *Festival feministского пис'ма*, which took place (online) for the first time in March 2021 and brought together a large number of authors, activists, translators, scholars, feminists, and poetry lovers.²¹ Contemporary feminist poetry is increasingly attracting critical attention, too.²² It is fair to assume that the repercussions

her younger colleagues – as her favorite poet (Vasiakina 2019). Rymbu also drives the discussion about feminist concerns in language and literature (Rymbu 2019).

¹⁸ Kostyleva singles out Kuz'min as her literary mentor and underlines the importance of his projects for feminist poetry in her interview for the project *Poëtika feminizma* (Kostyleva n.d.).

¹⁹ For discussions of these translations into English see Haynes (2020) and Zilberbourg (2020). The editors of "F-Letter" introduce the anthology in Ostashevsky / Morse (2020). Rymbu's own preface, in the original Russian, is available in Rymbu (2020c). For a review of "F-Letter" see Ebel (2020).

²⁰ The three Khachaturian sisters were charged with murder in 2018 after killing their father, who had physically and sexually abused them for years.

²¹ See Links – [12].

²² For example, Elena Georgievskaja, who singles out Vasiakina's collection «Ветер ярости» ("Wind of Fury") (Georgievskaja 2020). See also Stephanie Sandler's essay in this volume.

of this specific poem were amplified by Rymbu’s standing. Moreover, «Моя вагина», and the scandal it caused, made a significant contribution towards communicating the link between poetry and activism to people outside of literary, activist, and critical circles.

“My Vagina”

«Моя вагина» employs a form that has become increasingly common in Rymbu’s poetry. The poem is very long, consisting of clearly separate sections that each pursue their own specific focus. Moreover, «Моя вагина» is written in free verse; the language is simple, the metaphors transparent, and the phrasing concise; there is little obvious sound play. A highly topical poem, it is both accessible and supremely translatable, factors that have aided its quick proliferation. The first translation into English appeared the day after its publication; several others followed quickly.²³ More re-publications appeared in August and September, and later in the year, too, and these illustrate that publication on social media is not an impediment to print publication in the sphere of Russian literature today. What is more, it can evidently fast-track a poem for being brought to the attention of publishers.²⁴

«Моя вагина» is an uncomplicated poem if we consider only the lexicon, poetic devices, or metaphors. However, this apparent simplicity is offset by the poem’s composition. An attentive reading reveals a carefully crafted political poem that is laced with references to the Tsvetkova affair: both her name and her public on VKontakte are mentioned, and gender fluidity and homosexual sex feature prominently. Moreover, «Моя вагина» is almost archetypal in its display of key feminist tenets, yet at the same time strikingly original and personal.

In section five of the poem, the vagina becomes a stand-in for the female body as a whole when the poet offers the weary observation that, in a society struggling with its patriarchal heritage, «до моей вагины всем есть дело» (“my vagina is everyone’s business”). The list that follows is both universal and specific, with certain terms (*эшники* for “special forces,” *батюшка* for “priest” rather than the universal *священник*) that clearly invoke a Russian context:

²³ The poem was translated into English by Kevin M.F. Platt, see Platt (2020a); into Latvian by Anna Auziņa, see Auzina (2020); into Polish by Aneta Kamińska, see Kamińska (2020); into Romanian by Lilia Nenescu, see Nenescu (n.d.). There are also translations into Ukrainian and Belarusian.

²⁴ A translation into German by Jan Schaldach was featured as a poem of the day on a platform not specializing in feminist texts, see Schaldach (n.d.). A Danish translation was also published by Jon Kyst (paywall), see Kyst (n.d.). Both online and print versions were published in the original Russian by the Ukrainian journal ShO, see Rymbu (2020d). For the publication of Kevin Platt’s English translation and his preface, see Platt (2020b). The final version of Platt’s translation is also published in Rymbu / Ostashevsky / Morse (ed., 2020).

государству, родителям, гинекологам, незнакомым мужчинам,
 православным батюшкам, у которых под рясой погоны,
 а на рясе – женская кровь,
 работодателям, эшникам, военным, нацикам, миграционным службам,
 банкам, консервативным критикам «развратного образа жизни»,
 патриотичным деятелям культуры, юзающим традиционные ценности
 под коньячок.²⁵

the government, my parents, gynaecologists, men I don't know,
 Orthodox priests with epaulettes under their cassocks
 and women's blood on the cassock itself,
 employers, special forces, soldiers, nazis, migration control,
 banks, conservative critics of the 'depraved lifestyle',
 patriotic cultural figures debating traditional values
 while sipping cognac.²⁶

Another feature that betrays the poem's close ties to contemporary Russian feminism is the manner in which Rymbu merges, even identifies, the private with the political: «Но мне нравится мыслить её политически» (“but I like thinking about it [i.e. my vagina, J.v.Z.] in political terms”), or: «Моя вагина – это любовь, история и политика» (“My vagina is love, history, and politics”).²⁷ The private, in its most basic definition, emerges as the strongest political force there is. With little discernible irony, the poet declares that the vagina – representing the individual woman as well as feminist literature – will achieve the feats many activists dream of:

Я думаю, а что, может, и правда вагина погубит это государство,
 прогонит незаконного президента,
 отправит в отставку правительство.

I think that perhaps it's true that the vagina will destroy this state,
 drive out the illegal president,
 make the government redundant.

By the end of the poem, and particularly once we have read the companion poem «Великая русская литература» (“Great Russian Literature”), discussed below, we are inclined to agree. How does Rymbu achieve this?

The separate sections hone in on the great taboos that still surround the female body, and certainly not just in Russia. Section one begins with the raw physicality of childbirth – the definitive womanly act, since men cannot do it, and since reproduction is central to the species – and the damage this causes to the body:

²⁵ See Rymbu (2020e). All further citations refer to this version.

²⁶ All translations in this article are the author's.

²⁷ See Dmitrii Kuz'min's essay in this volume for an exposition of how contemporary Russian poets develop this idea, which has its origin in the 1960s women's movement and was first verbalized by the American feminist Carol Hanisch in 1969.

Потом мою вагину зашили,
она изменила форму. Стала узкой и стянутой
вагина-тюрьма, вагина-рана.

Later they sewed up my vagina,
it changed form. It became a narrow, tight
vagina-prison, a vagina-wound.

Normally, this kind of detail is carefully omitted from the omnipresent glossy stories hailing new motherhood. The following section could not be more different: an erotic poem, it tells of the joy of (heterosexual) sexual union using woman-centric (and hence feminist) images:

Теперь моя вагина – это норка
для твоего коричневого зверька с большой красной головкой.
куда он иногда проскальзывает, чтобы набраться сил.

Now my vagina is a burrow
for your little brown beast with its big red head.
it slips in there from time to time to gather strength.

These images are particular to the couple portrayed; this, and their non-sensational tenderness, places them beyond reach of the norms that define sex in the public eye – norms that are shaped by pornography and obscene language.

In section four, Rymbu celebrates menstruation as a special time to be enjoyed and a prime occasion for having sex. In so doing, she challenges a taboo that has been deployed for centuries to limit women's access to public life, and which is still used for that purpose in many parts of the world today.²⁸ What is more, the first-person heroine has an enlightened male partner who celebrates her body and its natural functions. His continued presence throughout the poem indicates that the text is in no way advocating a female-only space but rather pushing back against a notion of the world as defined by norms that exclude and/or restrict female-specific experience.

By contrast, an adolescent girl's discovery of her own body as a sexual entity is hers alone. Rymbu describes her search for a space not defined by boys' games and tastes; she, too, had accepted society's concept of sex as intercourse, as when she first masturbated:

²⁸ Many religious traditions regard menstruating women as ritually impure, notably Judaism (the relevant texts are, of course, also part of the Christian heritage, for example, Leviticus 20:18: "If a man lies with a woman during her menstrual period and uncovers her nakedness, he has made naked her fountain, and she has uncovered the fountain of her blood. Both of them shall be cut off from among their people." See also Leviticus 15:19-30) and Islam. In some Hindu communities in Nepal, menstruating women must stay in a designated hut (the practice persists, although illegal). More subtle discrimination exists, too: in poor communities, the unavailability of sanitary products affects teenage girls' school attendance.

Когда мне было 13, я пыталась засунуть туда дачный
огурец: хотела понять, что такое секс.
Тогда я ещё не знала, что это не только
пенетрация.

When I was 13 I tried to insert a summer
cucumber: I wanted to understand what sex is like.
Back then I didn't know yet that sex is not just
penetration.

The heroine also explores the excitement of touch with a female school friend, a scene that can be interpreted in several ways. To include a lesbian scene is most explicitly a token of solidarity with the LGBTQ activist Tsvetkova and the other lesbian and bisexual women who are such an important part of the feminist movement. Moreover, it protects the poem – a text that advocates for an inclusive approach to female sexuality – against being interpreted as heteronormative. Perhaps the scene of two girls' shared bliss and speechlessness also simply acknowledges the fact that sexuality is a spectrum and that people might find themselves at different points on this spectrum at different stages in their lives.

A particular focus of this poem is terminology: Rymbu uses a precise, unemotive lexicon – vagina, clitoris, penetration, penis, perineum, menstruation, period – that stands in marked contrast both to the belittling euphemisms we tend to use for body parts and physiological processes and to obscene language, which so often centers on genitals and sex. It hence becomes much harder to call her poem obscene or pornographic. The same conversational manner in which she refers to sex and body parts and all other phenomena normalizes these terms as parts of everyday speech. Rymbu is indeed highly aware of terminology and the associations triggered by specific words, and she deftly inverts received discourse and makes it her own when she observes that, while women allegedly have a “pussy” (note that this is the first time she uses the first-person plural), her organ is nothing like that; in fact, it is the exact opposite – a pretty, fluffy, but skittish mouse. She then goes on to literalize the image:

Наши вагины и вульвы называют кисками,
но у меня скорее не киска, а домашняя декоративная мышка,
маленькая, пушистая, беспокойная.
Она умрёт раньше времени?
Она умрёт в клетке?

Our vaginas and vulvas are called pussies,
but what I have is not a pussy, but more like a decorative pet mouse
small, fluffy, and skittish.
Will she die before her time?
Will she die in a cage?

The final section consists of a chain of images that explicitly identify the first-person heroine with her vagina:

Моя вагина – это любовь, история и политика.
 Моя политика – это тело, быт, аффект.
 Мой мир – вагина. Я несу мир,
 но для некоторых я – опасная вагина,
 боевая вагина. Это мой монолог.

My vagina is love, history and politics.
 My politics is the body, everyday life, affect.
 My world is the vagina. I carry the world,
 but some think that I’m a dangerous vagina,
 a warrior-vagina. This is my monologue.

Hence Rymbu calls her poem, which takes the form of a monologue, a “vagina monologue.” This move allows her to end on an unobtrusive reference to Tsvetkova’s group on VKontakte – the one that earned her the pornography charge.

In Response to her Detractors: “Great Russian Literature”

As predicted in the poem, everybody did, indeed, have something to say about Rymbu’s titular vagina. The world of Russian poetry remains largely conservative; this concerns content as well as form. While the popularity of free verse is growing rapidly, especially among younger poets, formal poetry continues to exert a strong influence.²⁹ This distinguishes the Russian poetry scene from its UK and US counterparts. Confessional poetry that involves frank descriptions of bodily processes came to Russia comparably late. At least as important is the fact that Russian society remains socially conservative. A sizeable part of the public lends at least silent support to laws such as that prescribing the “protection of children from information advocating for a denial of traditional family values” – that is, the law that can be used against anybody seen to be representing homosexuality as normal. Consequently, Rymbu’s poem is much more daring in its native context than it might sound in English. Many followers and fellow poets expressed their support, praising the poem’s literary quality and/or Rymbu’s courage. At the same time, «Моя вагина» also triggered a disturbing amount of misogynist hate speech, some of which was expressed on Rymbu’s own Facebook page (she has since disabled the ‘comment’ function for non-friends). However, most of the

²⁹ For an overview and conceptualization of contemporary free verse, see Orlitskii (2021: 176-209). Orlitskii is a curator as well as a researcher: the long-standing annual *Festival verlibra (Festival of Free Verse)*, which he now curates together with his daughter Anna, has evolved into a four-day marathon. In 2019, the poems that were read at the festivals between 1990 and 2018, were published as a two-volume anthology, accessible on the *Russian Free Verse* project’s new website, <https://rusfreeverse.com/books#anthology>. Yet the continued existence of an event specific to this form indicates that, for the time being, free verse remains the exception rather than the rule in Russian poetry.

derogatory, threatening, or just plain vulgar comments were posted on the pages of others who had shared and/or discussed her text.

Of course, there is no justification for abuse in any form. At the same time, it is almost comical to see how predictably a certain segment of the internet reiterates the same tired clichés. The toxicity of many comments is, unfortunately, characteristic of contemporary socio-political debate in many countries and of the online experience of outspoken women in general; however, it is not the topic of analysis here. I will focus exclusively on two incidents with a discernible literary component. It is worth noting that Rymbu's detractors in these cases are not acting as literary critics who ask questions and engage in dialogue. Rather, they present themselves as guardians of literary morality who effectively tell a (fellow) poet what (not) to write about. And, perhaps not surprisingly, the target is a (young) woman who writes, unashamedly, about (her own) sex.

Emblematic of this specious moralism is a Facebook post from 3 July by the Kazakh-Russian poet Bakhyt Kenzheev. Using perfectly polite language (unlike many others who became involved in the discussion on Kenzheev's page) he begins his dismissal of «Моя вагина» by sharing a jovial anecdote about the “organ of love” being the heart. He subsequently chides Rymbu, whom he recognizes as a “good poet,” for writing a poem about what he considers to be medical detail:

Есть такой древний анекдот про экзамены в медицинском институте. Профессор: «Расскажите, пожалуйста, об анатомии органа любви.» Студент: «Мужского или женского?» Профессор: «Все равно!» Студент дает обстоятельный и безупречный ответ. И получает четверку. «Но почему не пятерка?» «Вы знаете, молодой человек, в мои времена органом любви называлось сердце...» Это я к тому, что прекрасный Дмитрий Плахов сегодня вывесил у себя длинное стихотворение хорошего поэта Галины Рымбу. Оно про вагину. И стоило мне увидеть это слово, как сразу потянуло хлоркой и формалином, как из мертвецкой, а уж когда дошел до «пенетрации», так и подташнивать начало. Ох, не стоит поверять алгеброй гармонию, мне кажется. И стихов про поджелудочную железу или двенадцатиперстную кишку тоже, наверное, писать не стоит. 😊³⁰

There is this very old joke about exams at the medical institute. The professor says: “Please tell us about the anatomy of the organ of love.” The student replies: “The male organ or the female?” Professor: “Whichever you like!” The student provides a detailed, flawless description. And gets a B. “But why not an A?” – “Young man, you know, in my time the organ of love was known as the heart...” I'm telling you this, because today the wonderful Dmitrii Plakhov reposted on his page a long poem by Galina Rymbu, who is a good poet. The poem is about the vagina. And as soon as I spotted that word, I caught a whiff of chlorine and formalin, like in the morgue, and by the time I got to “penetration,” I started feeling faintly sick. Oh my, I feel one shouldn't measure harmony by algebra. And it's probably not advisable to write poems on the pancreas or the appendix either. ☺

³⁰ See Kenzheev (n.d.).

If we take him at his word, Kenzheev’s revulsion at the medical whiff that, in his imagination, emanates from Rymbu’s lexicon demonstrates an astonishing degree of ignorance on the part of the older poet, who has been living in North America since the early 1980s: after all, unlike the vagina, the pancreas and appendix are not part of the political discourse within which Rymbu’s poem is situated. Certainly, the Russian state does not persecute anybody for drawings of a pancreas on social media, but is much less tolerant of vaginas, as the Tsvetkova affair shows – and, in her poem, Rymbu makes a point of stressing that her own freedom of expression is conditional upon her living outside Russia (she now resides in L’viv, Ukraine).

Kenzheev invokes classical poetry and its musicality by alluding to a line from the opening scene of Pushkin’s 1830 verse play, “Mozart and Salieri,” in which the latter deplores «Поверил / Я алгеброй гармонию» (“I measured / Harmony by arithmetic”). In doing so, he implies that there are artistic standards that should not be tested. Yet literature – indeed any art – develops by pushing boundaries, formal and semantic. Those who follow Kenzheev in decrying Rymbu’s disregard for allegedly immovable literary standards are effectively their unease about boundaries being challenged (and, what’s more, by a young woman) behind a much more superficial indignation at the poet’s topic, lexicon, and formal tropes. Seen in this light, the outrage of Rymbu’s detractors seems directed at the very existence of a literary universe that is emphatically different from the one that they themselves favor but that is, by now, impossible to overlook.

Yet Kenzheev’s indignation at the appearance of (female) genitalia in the role of literary protagonist is positively benevolent and straightforward compared to the reaction of others, both male and female, who felt compelled to respond publicly to Rymbu’s poem. One example is the literary columnist Viktoriia Shokhina who, on 5 July, published a blog called «Границы поэзии» (“The Limits of Poetry”), consisting of the parody poem «Вагины Галины» (“Galina’s Vaginas”) (in Russian, the title rhymes) and a condemnation of Rymbu’s approach (rather than her subject matter).³¹ Shokhina’s piece represents a cross-section of the politically tinged invective often levelled at feminist poets in contemporary Russia: their gender activism is ridiculed («меня всегда смущало в феминистском дискурсе яростное стремление утвердить свой гендер; наверное, правильнее в этом случае сказать – свою гендерку» (“what has always disconcerted me in feminist discourse is the frenzied need to establish one’s gender; probably in this case I should say one’s *genderka*”³²). Meanwhile,

³¹ See Shokhina (2020).

³² Ibid. *Genderka* – Russian is a gendered language, and Shokhina’s mock-feminine version of the grammatically masculine abstract term ‘gender’ is a reference to the practice of Rymbu and many others, who insist on the use of feminine endings for nouns denoting professions. Where these don’t exist, they create them: for example, *кураторка* (*female curator*) or *авторка* (*female author*). At the same time, in other contexts the suffix *-ka* can have a diminutive, belittling and/or affectionate function (*сума* [*bag*] and *сумка* [*ladies’ handbag*]; *дочь*

the trademark form of free verse resembling the spoken-word cadences that is used by Rymbu, Yusupova, Vasyakina, and others and is also popular in Anglo-phone activist verse is derided as ‘foreign’:

Но дело не в теме – для поэзии нет запретных тем. Дело в том, как эта тема решается. [...] Поэзии как таковой нет. Есть нечто, подражающее русским переводам с американского.³³

The topic is not the issue – there are no forbidden topics in poetry. The issue is the presentation. [...] There is no poetry to speak of here. This is something that resembles Russian translations from the American.

Arguably the most unsavory aspect of Shokhina’s piece is how she yokes gender politics to nationalist concerns, decrying the close alliance of feminist and LGBTQ causes as an example of Western cultural intrusion. Hers is a prime example of the discourse of conservative nationalist forces, which identify sexual identity with political ideology and construe non-heterosexual and non-cisgender identities as alien imports from the West:

Она была девочкой
в розовом платье [...]
вся как радуга
на флаге над посольством США в Москве³⁴

She was a little girl
in a pink dress [...]
just like the rainbow
on the flag above the US Embassy in Moscow³⁵

In the same vein, the émigrée Rymbu, who chose to live in Ukraine – a country embroiled in a protracted war with Russia – is lambasted by Shokhina as lacking in patriotism. Patriotism, according to Shokhina, involves consent to Russian government policy in the areas of foreign policy, treatment of political opponents, and family/gender politics:

девочка выросла, определилась
и переехала во Львов,
там свобода и Крымненаш.
+++
Отмените референдум по Конституции!
Освободите политзаключенных!

[*daughter*] and *дочка* – affectionate term that can also refer to a young child). The term *genderka* carries all these associations; Shokhina thus presents gender as a profession/aim in itself as well as a minor thing that does not need to be taken entirely seriously.

³³ Shokhina (2020).

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ This is a reference to the scandal that broke on 25 June 2020 when the US Embassy raised the rainbow flag to honor the flag’s 42nd anniversary. In 2020, the date coincided with the beginning of the Constitutional referendum in Russia. For information, including links to various Russian sources providing commentary on the incident, see Links – [13].

Запретите патриотам патриотить
традиционные ценности!³⁶

The girl grew up, made up her mind
and moved to L’vov³⁷
there’s freedom there and *Krymnenash*.³⁸

+++

Cancel the Constitutional Referendum!³⁹
Free the political prisoners!
Forbid the patriots from patriotizing
traditional values!⁴⁰

While Facebook’s newsfeed mechanism and limited search function naturally bury older posts under the sediment of newer material, which makes it difficult to uncover them once time has passed, blog posts remain visible to search engines. Today, Kenzheev’s post will only be read by those who know about it and scroll through his profile. Meanwhile, an internet search for responses to Rymbu’s poem returns Shokhina’s blog near the top of the results list.

On 3 July, Rymbu responded to the torrent of negativity she had encountered already by posting a new poem called «Великая русская литература» (“Great Russian Literature”).⁴¹ Those who have read the comments below «Моя вагина» and followed the discussion on the pages of Kenzheev and Rymbu will see that she has re-purposed some of the negative comments to lend a mordant note to her answer poem.

³⁶ Shokhina (2020).

³⁷ L’vov – the Russian name of L’viv in Western Ukraine.

³⁸ *Krymnenash* – literally “Crimea’s not ours,” a reference to *Krymnash*, “Crimea’s ours,” the ubiquitous slogan used by Russians who approved of the annexation of Crimea by Russia in 2014.

³⁹ In summer 2020 the Russian government held a popular referendum on extensive amendments to the Constitution, which included greater concentration of power in the hands of the president, permission for the current president to serve beyond the usual two terms by means of “annulling” terms already served, and the definition of marriage as a union between a man and a woman. The referendum carried.

⁴⁰ “Traditional values” – a version of the widely used euphemisms that set off heterosexual monogamous relationships against all others, derived from the infamous “anti-gay” law of 2013: «Виды информации, причиняющей вред здоровью и (или) развитию детей: (информация) отрицающая семейные ценности, пропагандирующая нетрадиционные сексуальные отношения [...]» (“Forms of information that cause harm to the health and/or development of children are: [information] that negates family values, propagates non-traditional sexual relations [...]”; Federal Law of the Russian Federation No 436-FZ, Article 5.4)

⁴¹ See Rymbu (2020b).

Unlike «Моя вагина», which is almost entirely written in the first-person singular, large parts of «Великая русская литература» use the first-person plural. In these sections, the poet purports to speak for all women; or, at least, for all women who write. Her tone is belligerent. The poem starts with a series of rhetorical questions directed at her attackers:

Кто в «русской литературе» эстетизировал насилие над женщиной?

Кто имеет право и голос, чтобы издеваться в своих текстах и комментариях над нашими словами, нашим телом, нашими мыслями и текстами?

Кто может написать про нашу поэзию, поэзию женщин:
«эта девочка больна, раз такое пишет»⁴²

Who aestheticized violence against women in “Russian literature”?

Who has the right and the voice to mock our words, our body, our thoughts and our texts in their texts and comments?

Who can write about our poetry, women’s poetry:
“this girl must be sick to write this stuff”

While her list includes the body as the aspect by which women are often defined, her focus is very much on the chauvinistic criticism of women’s words – and, we can assume, specifically of women’s poetry. The shift from ‘I’ to ‘we’ offers an interesting angle for analysis. The individual under attack from a crowd (re-)conceptualizes herself as the representative of an invisible collective. The ‘we’ of Rymbu’s heroine seems inclusive – she is writing from within, and on behalf of, the collective of women writers. At the same time, one purpose of this ‘we’ is clearly to delineate identity and draw battle lines. ‘We’ stands for female writers who suffer censure at the hands of the male establishment and who are aware of, and struggling against, patriarchal power structures. Rymbu’s ‘we’ is effectively the ‘we’ of feminist poets, and it has a clearly delineated opponent: the literary establishment, dominated by men with patriarchal values, which is presented in this poem as a hostile, closed group with the temerity to impose norms upon women and the texts that they write.⁴³

Rather than make the shift from individual to collective an explicit one (as, for example, Anna Akhmatova does in her “Requiem”), Rymbu seamlessly moves from singular to plural and back again. Just like «Моя вагина», «Великая русская литература» contains elements that seem plausibly autobiographical, and these elements are told by a female first-person narrator. This narrator seems to introduce some distance from the ideological standpoint of the ‘we’ narrator. However, her voice lacks the tenderness that marks lexicon and inflection of «Моя

⁴² Rymbu (2020f). All further citations refer to this version.

⁴³ Natalia Azarova has conducted a large-scale survey study on the use of ‘we’ in contemporary Russian poetry based, among other things, on the concept of inclusive and exclusive ‘we’ put forward by Karl Bühler in his “Theory of Language” (1934). See Azarova (2019). For a theoretical treatment, see Stahl (2019).

вагина». The encounters between this first-person heroine with those who oppose her poetics in the name of received literary standards – all the things that ‘classical literature’ stands for – have been marked by violence, whether physical or verbal/virtual. We witness how she, still a teenager, is slapped by a male poet following a disagreement over poetic forms, while the others at the literary gathering continue to socialize as if nothing happened. She continues to address a single opponent in the second-person plural when she calls out a person who used the internet as an easy way to harass her with personal messages, including unsolicited ‘dick pics,’ and adds that this has happened multiple times. Indeed, #Me-Too (in Russian, #Янебоюсьсказать) has proven this experience to be so common, especially for women in the public eye, that the singular comes to denote a generic action.

In step with the subject matter, the lexicon of «Великая русская литература» is radically different from that of «Моя вагина». While the latter only features two instances of profanity, vulgar language abounds in «Великая русская литература», although all obscenities refer back to the aggressors – men who habitually use this language themselves, posing as macho, while remaining speechless when it comes to fields of sexual pleasure that require trust and self-abandonment:

в твоей самой запретной
метафоре – простате,
которую нельзя стимулировать,
про которую нельзя говорить,
которую, наверное, даже нельзя так называть:
(слишком физиологично, даже пахнет
МИДИЦИНСКИМ ФЕМЕНИЗМОМ,
от которого просто тошнит)

in your most forbidden
metaphor – the prostate,
which one mustn’t stimulate,
which one mustn’t talk about,
which one probably mustn’t even call that:
(too physiological, it even carries a whiff of
MIDICAL FEMENIZM,
which makes you simply feel sick)

“MIDICAL FEMENIZM,” deliberately misspelled, is an intertextual reference to Kenzheev’s claim that Rymbu’s poem «Моя вагина» carries the odor of the morgue. Rymbu thus clearly identifies the discourse of Kenzheev and those arguing like him as representative of the order her poem is attacking.

«Великая русская литература» is an indictment of a literature that is part of a system perpetuating the violent repression of women and their voices. According to Rymbu’s heroine, this system works because it is implicit. In other words, it is not acknowledged as an order created for the benefit of a particular group, not

least because to acknowledge it as such would expose the patriarchal order as potentially replaceable by another (any other) system:

Кто ИЗ ВАС может честно написать об этом?
 Объяснить, как работает эта система и что она для вас
 значит? КТО?
 Напиши!
 Будь смелым,
 покажи нам
 СВОЁ
 ПРИРОДНОЕ
 ПРАВО!

Who OF YOU can honestly write about this?
 Explain how this system functions and what it means
 for you? WHO?
 Come on, write!
 Courage!
 show us
 YOUR
 NATURAL
 RIGHT!

In this poem, the term “classical Russian literature” applies not just to well-known texts in which «барин насилует служанку» (“the landowner rapes the servant girl”) with impunity. Rather, it designates the established contemporary literary scene that subjects creative, non-conformist women to verbal or even physical violence if they refuse to tone down their voices.

But «Великая русская литература» ends on a note of defiant hope, or challenge: Rymbu’s first-person narrator affirms that the literature defined by a certain group of men is not ‘our literature.’ This is the place at which she opens out her ‘we’ to include not just female poets, not just women, but (perhaps predictably) LGBTQ people and others who challenge gender norms; and also, crucially, men who are not defined and hobbled by patriarchal norms:

Хоть бы вам такую одежду, которая делала бы вас невидимыми,
 для нас, для женщин, девушек, дочерей,
 и для мужчин, отказывающихся вписываться в матрицу
 гегемонной маскулинности,
 критикующих патриархат,
 не играющих по его правилам,
 для квинных людей, идущих за руку по улице,
 для небинарных персон с цветными волосами,
 идущих по улице с улыбкой – вам навстречу,
 для гомосексуалов, лесбиянок,
 бисексуалок и бисексуалов,
 интерсексуальных, агендерных
 и транс*персон,

May you have clothes that make you invisible
to us, to women, girls, daughters,
and to men who refuse to be written into the matrix
of hegemonic masculinity,
who criticize the patriarchy,
who don't play by its rules,
to queer persons holding hands in the street,
to non-binary persons with colorful hair,
who walk down the street with a smile on their face and in your direction,
to gay men and lesbian women,
to bisexual women and men
to intersexual, non-gendered
and trans*persons,

Only one group is left out of this expanded collective, this reassuring space of 'we': namely, those men who now impose their standards on Russian literature, gesturing towards a patriarchal tradition:

Ведь это важно — запоминать
мысли известных культурных деятелей и поэтов
великой страны, великой империи.

It's important after all to remember
the thoughts of the well-known cultural figures and poets
of the great country, the great empire.

Those are the same men that Rymbu's heroine has been denouncing for intimidation and gender-based violence throughout the poem. And in a transparent reference to a well-known establishment writer who continues to champion the war in Ukraine, she draws a direct line between violence against women and Russia's military aggression:

Вспоминаешь, Хазар Облепин?
[...]

а потому,
что тешил свой хуёк
на территории боевых действий
в чужой стране
чужими смертями,
чужими смертями,
дрочил себе смертью и темнотой,
возвеличивал свой фаллос количеством цинковых гробов,
к которым причастны твои друзья, насильники женщин,
пользующиеся военной ситуацией,
а потом написал об этом
геройскую, да? Книгу.

Remember that, Khazar Oblepin?
[...]

but because
 you entertained your tiny cock
 during active combat
 in a foreign country
 with other people's deaths
 you wanked on death and darkness
 you exalted your phallus by the number of zinc coffins
 in which your friends are complicit, rapists of women
 who take advantage of the war situation,
 and later you wrote about it
 a heroic book, right?

This implicit connection between gender-based violence and an authoritarian, imperial, repressive state is a key element of Rymbu's theory of political feminism and will be discussed, briefly, in the conclusion.

By the end of «Великая русская литература», the heroine's 'we' has morphed into an exclusive 'we' that establishes a clear sense of (upside-down) hierarchy: a just, poetic hierarchy, which deposes those who define literature today from their seats of power. The future of Russian literature is not the "greatness" that, in Russian, carries notions of national exceptionalism, but openness:

Наша разная. Русскоязычная, билингвальная,
 полилингвальная,
 анархичная, нефаллоцентричная,
 не патриотичная. ОНА ПРОТИВ
 тухлого патриотизма и режимного государства
 в принципе. Всегда была.
 И не великая,
 а ОТКРЫТАЯ.
 Но
 это
 литература
 будущего

Our literature is different. In Russian, bilingual,
 polylingual,
 anarchist, non-phallocentric,
 not patriotic. IT IS AGAINST rotten patriotism and the security state
 on principle. Always has been.
 And it's not great,
 but OPEN.
 But
 this is
 the literature
 of the future

The effect of this ingenious juggling of pronouns – from plural to singular and back – is that those excluded from the future of Russian literature are precisely the men to whom the poet's heroine addressed her rhetorical questions at the start. When the

narrator associates the literature of the future with her vagina, the phrasing invokes both Rymbu’s original poem, which started the controversy, and the inclusive feminism she promotes. It is a literature in which women have a full voice:

ЭТО
ЛИТЕРАТУРА
БУДУЩЕГО
МОЯ ВАГИНА
ЛИТЕРАТУРА ВСЯ
МОЯ
ВАГИНА
И ТЕБЕ ТУТ НЕ МЕСТО.

*

Тебе пизда.

THIS IS
THE LITERATURE
OF THE FUTURE
MY VAGINA
ALL OF LITERATURE IS
MY
VAGINA
AND THERE IS NO SPACE HERE FOR YOU.

*

The cunt will get you.

The concluding lines hinge on the contrast between the neutral term *вагина* – and everything it represents in Rymbu’s poetic universe, from women to feminist literature – and its vulgar synonym *пизда*, a word that provides the root for many Russian swearwords. In the form of the derivative *пиздец*, *пизда* is indicative of an unpleasant or desperate situation or outcome: «тебе пиздец» can be translated as “you’re done for.” But here, Rymbu’s heroine uses the dative construction «тебе...» with the original term. The second-person singular indicates the familiarity employed when we curse, but it also gives the impression that the poem is addressing an individual detractor, or rather, that the heroine’s detractors had by now all morphed into one person. Her use of *пизда* is effective on several levels: as a contrast to the positively described *вагина*, as an echo of a widespread vulgar expression, and as a clear signpost. Throughout the poem, vulgar language has been used to connote unreformed, patriarchal men, the men who revolt against the term *вагина* in a poem – ultimately, the men who promote the “great Russian literature” that Rymbu’s heroine denounces as outdated and representative of an oppressive ideology. But there is more to these final lines: “the literature of the future” is a transparent allusion to Rymbu’s most recent poetry collection, published in 2020, entitled «Ты – будущее» (“You are the Future”).

Conclusion

Like the Tsvetkova affair, «Моя вагина» and its impact originated in, and were carried along by, social media. Social media offers tremendous opportunities to poets. Liberated from the need to find favor with the editors of a very limited number of print journals (as is the situation in Russia) – or even the editors of online poetry platforms – and set free from long publication cycles, poetry posted on social media can react to current events in real time and generate aesthetic as well as political debate. Poets can also curate and engage with their audience, potentially reaching far more people than any other form of publication. Social media can make poetry ‘go viral,’ and political poetry is particularly prone to snowballing in this way. This phenomenon has been studied, particularly with regard to the multimedia/video poetry deployed by activists in response to the war in Ukraine.⁴⁴ While «Моя вагина» did not reach numbers that would justify calling it a ‘viral’ poem, it proliferated far more than could be expected of a poem published in a journal. Moreover, its proliferation shows that the mechanisms that make video poetry into a tool for political discourse also work in the case of text-only posts; for example, «Моя вагина» triggered not just heated debate but also a number of answer poems, some of which parody the tone of the original.⁴⁵ Social media is central to contemporary activism for precisely the same reasons: immediacy and the potential to reach an exponentially larger number of people through the snowball effect of reposting content. Social media is thus a natural meeting place for art and activism. This is precisely why Iuliia Tsvetkova used it for her work, and why actions in her support had such resonance. In this sense, social media has endowed art with the power to be political, to raise awareness, to rally, and to polarize.

Much of the support for Iuliia Tsvetkova came under the hashtag “My body is not a crime” («Мое тело не преступление»). Rymbu states that she hopes to «Делать революцию вагиной. / Делать свободу собой.» (“Make revolution with my vagina. / Make freedom with myself.”).⁴⁶ Contemporary feminist poetry cannot be divorced from its political mission, which goes far beyond a preoccupation with women’s rights. Rymbu herself describes the political dimension as follows:

В новой российской феминистской поэзии нередко проблематизируется связь насилия государственного и насилия гендерного, домашнего насилия, насилия на почве ненависти к ЛГБТ+. Нынешний российский режим с его институтами государственного, полицейского и военизированного насилия

⁴⁴ E.g. by Stahl (2015).

⁴⁵ Andrei Rogatchevski has analyzed activist video lyrics in the Ukraine war with special attention to the genre of the answer song; significantly, he conceptualized all these videos as music rather than poetry, including Anastasia Dmitruk’s «Никогда мы не будем братьями» (“We will never be brothers”). See Rogatchevski (2019).

⁴⁶ Rymbu (2020d).

не может существовать без поддержки института насилия в семье и гендерного подавления. Этот режим гипермаскулинен, но в то же время все время обеспокоен своей маскулинной идентичностью и боится ее потерять.⁴⁷

New Russian feminist poetry often focuses on the problematic link between state violence and gender-based violence, domestic violence and violence based on hatred towards LGBT+. The contemporary Russian regime, with its institutions of state violence, police violence, and militarized violence, cannot exist without the support of the institution of violence in the family and gendered repression. This regime is hypermasculine but at the same time is always concerned with its masculine identity and afraid of losing it.

Read in this way, feminist poets have managed to use their art in order to position themselves as outspoken opponents of the current regime. In the Russia that has managed to effectively silence so much political opposition and protest since 2012 (the year of both the Bolotnaia Square case and the Pussy Riot case, as well as the legislation against “gay propaganda,” which was signed into law in 2013), feminism has shown itself to be highly resilient and inventive. This is conceivably a result of women’s issues («женский вопрос») having become so politicized in the wake of the aggressively retrograde gender and family politics pursued by the Russian state. Examples include not only the law against gay propaganda but also the de-criminalization of domestic violence and the practice of using anti-pornography and anti-paedophilia laws to discredit political opponents (cf. the case of Iuliia Tsvetkova but also the Kafkaesque case of the historian Iurii Dmitriev, which has been ongoing since 2016). While the policies pursued in Russia might seem extreme, citizens of other countries should not be complacent: the same tendencies are evident in many places. Examples include the homophobic rhetoric at a government level in some Eastern European countries (Poland, Hungary) and the resurgence of an aggressive anti-abortion debate in the US and, less forcefully, in the UK. In the face of challenges such as the coronavirus pandemic, climate change, economic crisis, war, and mounting international tensions, some ruling elites remain embroiled in sexual politics. Perhaps this is why feminist activism has turned out to be so vocal and robust in Russia, and why, in the words of Rymbu’s poem, the vagina – as a synecdoche for ‘feminism’ – is an effective political instrument.

The case of «Моя вагина» throws into sharp relief a number of questions that include genre (does work that thrives on the internet have to fulfil certain formal criteria, and are these different from those required by ‘traditional’ channels?); textual authority (it is easy for the author, and others, to modify or even remove a text circulating online); canonicity (do viral spread and frantic discussion in the comments section of a Facebook thread count as a measure of success?); and, last but not least, the unique vulnerability of an artist who may have to deal with a large number of abusive and personal comments and messages in real time.

⁴⁷ Rymbu (2020c).

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